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ABSTRACT

A major problem that continues to plague United States education is the fact that large numbers of disadvantaged black students are not learning to read well enough to function in society. This paper discusses three reasons for the problem of teaching reading to these students. First, there exist no comprehensive developmental reading theories, no basic understanding of the reading acquisition process. Second, most innovations that occur in such reading instruction are merely reorganizational, teaching the same sets of skills in different ways. Finally, reading research and instruction have tended to focus on materials and methods rather than on instructional interchange between teacher and students in classroom situations. From the discussion of these failures to improve reading instruction for blacks, the paper concludes that more research should take the form of classroom observation into the interaction behaviors and processes between teachers, disadvantaged black students, and instructional materials. Discussion following presentation of the paper is included. (RL)

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Black Dialect, Reading Interference and Classroom Interaction

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Black Dialect, Reading Interference and Classroom Interaction

Herbert D. Simons

A major problem that continues to plague American education is the fact that large numbers of Black students are not learning to read well enough to function in a society that requires its citizenry to attain a high degree of literacy. Black students' lack of reading skills remains a problem despite the great deal of attention that it has received and the enormous amount of federal, state and local money that has and continues to be spent in attempts to solve it. Our past performance on this problem leads one to sadly predict that the current emphasis on skill hierarchies, behavioral objectives, management systems and the like will produce the same meager results that programmed instruction, computer assisted instruction, performance contracting, talking typewriters, etc. have produced. There are at least three reasons for this dismal state of affairs. First, is a lack of basic understanding of the reading acquisition process. We do not have any comprehensive developmental theories

of reading acquisition. Despite the voluminous research literature, reading instruction is mostly art and very little science. Second, as a result of this lack of basic knowledge most innovations such as the ones mentioned end up organizing or arranging instruction in different ways but their content, i.e., the set of skills that are taught, remain the same. Thus we end up with the same old content presented in a new way. It is not surprising that students do not read any better under the new programs than the old ones. Finally, the research and instruction in reading has tended to focus on materials and methods rather than on the instructional interchange between teachers and students as it actually takes place in the classroom. This focus on methods and materials is, in my opinion, misguided and unlikely to prove fruitful in the future. This focus has had a major influence on the research on Black dialect and reading which is the main topic of this paper.

Black Language - The Deficit and Difference Viewpoints

Over the past decade one explanation that has been advanced for Black students' poor reading performance is their language. Two essentially different views of Black children's language have been proposed to explain their reading failure. They are deficit and difference views. The deficit view holds that the language of Black children is an inferior form of standard English which is unacceptable in school and society and is an inadequate vehicle for thinking and learning to read. Thus Black children are handicapped by the inadequacy of their language in learning to read. The deficit viewpoint, which has been shown to be false by Labov (1959) and others, appears to still be the predominant view in the schools and in society in general. My impression is that some progress has been made among faculty

members at schools of education and in the teaching of reading textbooks where the deficit view is out of favor, or at least is not publicly espoused. Unfortunately, in the places where most reading instruction takes place, the schools, the deficit view is still strong.

The difference view on the other hand holds that Black children speak a dialect of English which will be referred to in this paper as Black dialect. Black dialect as an expression of Black culture is a viable system of communication and as such is different from standard English but in no way inferior to it as a vehicle for thinking and learning to read. According to the difference viewpoint the problems that Black children have in learning to read are due to the fact that the schools operate with and recognize only standard English, and are unwilling and unable to accommodate to Black children and their language. The difference viewpoint is held by most linguists, anthropologists, and some psychologists and educators. The difference view is the prevailing notion among academics who study language. And there is now very little debate about the relative merits of the deficit and difference views. The issue is settled and the difference view prevails. Unfortunately, the majority of teachers of Black children, I would guess, ascribe to the deficit view and those that ascribe to the difference view only have a dim understanding of it and even less understanding of what it means in terms of reading instruction.

Both the deficit and difference points of view hold that there is a close relationship between language and reading and that the mismatch between Black children's language and the language used in school and in the reading texts

interferes with Black children's acquisition of reading skills. Proponents of each view differ profoundly in assigning blame for the problem and consequently in their proposals for remedying it. The deficit viewpoint as its name implies assumes that the Black child's language is defective and focuses on changing it. Its advocates propose either eliminating Black dialect entirely and replacing it with standard English or adding standard English as a second dialect. The instructional means for accomplishing this is usually borrowed from second language teaching techniques. All of this changing of the Black child's language is to take place either before reading instruction begins or concurrently with it. The objective is to remove the source of the problem.

The difference viewpoint assigns the blame to the schools and proposes that the schools accommodate to Black dialect. Its proponents would do this by changing the methods and materials to teach reading. Their proposals fall into two categories. The first would change the books that children learn to read with by essentially writing them in Black dialect.[1] The second, proposed by Goodman (1965), would retain the standard English materials but allow children to produce a Black dialect rendition of them. Thus in the first proposal only the materials are changed, while in the second the materials remain the same while the teachers must adopt a strategy of accommodating to dialect.

The proponents of the viewpoints discussed above have simply assumed that the mismatch between Black children's language and the language of the school causes reading interference. They (myself included) have adopted this assumption without proposing any detailed explanation of the mechanism for

this interference. Thus little if any of the research has been directed at describing these mechanisms. And since the proposals for remedying the problem concern methods and materials, the research has focused on materials and has attempted to demonstrate the existence of reading interference by concentrating on examining the effect of prototype instructional materials. For example, one major way of studying reading interference has been to compare Black children's reading of Black dialect and standard English texts. If the Black dialect texts produce better reading, then both reading interference and the usefulness of dialect reading texts is presumably demonstrated. These texts can then serve as prototypes for dialect readers.

A notable exception to the emphasis on materials is the Goodman (1965) proposal, which would retain the existing materials and focus on the teacher and his/her response to the Black child's dialect rendition of the text. Labov (1967) and a few others have focused on the teacher rather than on the materials. However, beyond the general call for teachers to know about dialect and its features and not to reject the child's language, and the more specific suggestion that dialect-based miscues not be corrected, there has been no real discussion of the mechanisms of interference nor of detailed strategies for teachers to follow in dealing with it. And since materials are easier to study than teachers, there has been almost no research on the Goodman (1965) proposal. The Piestrup (1973) study is the only one that I am familiar with that focused on teachers. Her study and an analysis of some of her data will be discussed in the last part of this paper.

I will now turn to the empirical evidence on the question of reading interference and the efficacy of the proposed remedies. In examining this evidence one finds that it is much more equivocal than one would expect given the forceful rhetoric that surrounds the issues.

Black Dialect and Reading Interference

Black dialect and standard English differ in phonological and grammatical features and in lexical items. Most of the research has been directed at questions of phonological and grammatical interference and has tended to study one or the other and only in some cases both.[2]

Phonological Interference

One major behavioral consequence of the difference between Black dialect and standard English phonological systems for reading acquisition is that certain written words are pronounced differently by Black dialect speakers than by standard English speakers. The results of these differences are words that have a pronunciation unique to Black dialect, e.g., "ness" for "nest," "ress" for "rest," and "han" for "hand." In addition, there are words whose Black dialect pronunciation results in a different word, e.g., "tess" for "test," "men" for "mend," "walk" for "walked," "coal" for "cold," etc. The latter result in an extra set of homophones for Black dialect speakers. These differences in pronunciation presumably could interfere with the acquisition of word recognition skills even though the precise way they interfere has never been spelled out.

Melmed (1970) conducted one of the first empirical studies of phonological interference. He compared third grade Black children with third grade White children on their ability to discriminate auditorily, to produce, and comprehend in oral and silent reading the major phonological features of Black dialect. He found that the Blacks differed from the Whites in auditory discrimination and production of the selected features, demonstrating that they were dialect speakers. If phonological interference exists then the speakers who exhibited the most dialect features, in this study the Black subjects, should do less well

on the reading measures than the Whites, who in this study exhibited fewer dialect features. If there is no phonological interference, then there should be no difference on the reading measures. The latter was found to be the case in Melmed's study. While Black subjects differed from Whites on auditory discrimination and production of Black dialect phonological features, they did not differ on their ability to comprehend them in oral and silent reading. Thus the Melmed study does not support the hypothesis of phonological interference. There are, however, some questions concerning the representativeness of his sample in terms of reading ability and degree of dialect that tend to weaken his findings.

Another study of phonological interference was conducted by Simons (1974), in which second, third, and fourth grade Black children read real and nonsense Black dialect homophone pairs, e.g., "bus"-"bust," "hus"-"hust." It was hypothesized that the first member of each pair would be easier to read since its spelling is closer to Black dialect phonology than the second member. In all three grades, there were either no differences between the word types or the difference favored the more complex spelling. Thus the phonological interference hypothesis was again not supported.

A third study of phonological interference was conducted by Rystrom (1970) who compared the effect of training in the production of standard English phonology on the reading achievement of first grade Black dialect speakers. The experimental group received training in producing standard English phonology; the control group received language arts training without particular emphasis on standard English. If phonological interference with learning to read exists, then the experimental group should exhibit less dialect as a result of the

training and should read better than the control group which should exhibit more dialect because they received no standard English training. He found training in standard English phonology did not produce significant differences in reading achievement on three measures of reading achievement. One significant difference was found but it favored the control group. Thus it appears that the Rystrom study also failed to support the hypothesis of phonological interference.

Rentel and Kennedy (1972) conducted another study relevant to the question of phonological interference. They studied the effects of pattern drill in standard English on first grade Appalachian dialect speakers and its influence on reading achievement. Since Appalachian dialect was studied and not Black dialect, the study is not an exact test of the question for Black dialect. However, Black dialect and Appalachian dialect have some features in common and they are both dialects of English, so that the results may have some bearing on the question for Black dialect speakers. Rentel and Kennedy employed the same research strategy as Rystrom in that they attempted to manipulate the amount of dialect to see if it affected reading achievement. If dialect interferes, the group that receives training in standard English should experience less interference and do better in reading than a comparable group who have no training and thus presumably experience more dialect interference.

Rentel and Kennedy found no difference in reading achievement between the experimental and control groups. Thus, this study fails also to support phonological interference. However, in both the Rentel and Kennedy, and Rystrom studies the standard English training failed to work so that one could argue that the phonological interference hypothesis was not adequately tested.

Further, but indirect, evidence on the question of phonological interference is provided by Osterberg (1961), who studied reading acquisition in a dialect area of Sweden. He conducted an experiment in which a group of first grade children were taught for the first ten weeks of the school year with books especially written to conform to the phonological features of the dialect area in which they lived. A control group received instruction using standard texts that conform to the standard Swedish speech. If phonological interference with learning to read exists, then teaching students to read with texts that conform to their phonological system should reduce this interference and thus increase reading achievement.

Osterberg found that the experimental group was superior to the control group after ten weeks, and at the end of one year, on various measures of reading achievement. Thus this study offers some support for the hypothesis of phonological interference.

With the exception of the Osterberg study the evidence on phonological interference tends to be negative. However, there are methodological problems with the studies concerning both internal and external validity that I have discussed elsewhere which tend to weaken the findings (Simons 1971). Thus the question of phonological interference while negative is still not closed.

Grammatical Interference

Turning to the question of grammatical reading interference, the evidence is even more negative. Grammatical reading interference is presumably caused by the mismatch between the Black child's syntax and the standard English syntax of the texts s/he reads (Stewart 1969, Baratz 1969). The mechanisms of this proposed interference are not very clear. They involve cases where

standard English sentences are interpreted as non-equivalent Black dialect sentences. For example,"He will be busy," might be interpreted as a habitual action because of the "be" (Stewart 1969). They also involve such things as failure to interpret "ed" as a past tense marker because it is not pronounced. And finally there is the extra step or translation hypothesis which proposes that Black children go through an extra step in reading because they have to translate from the standard English text to their own Black dialect grammatical system. None of these proposals are very convincing.

The empirical research on grammatical interference has with few exceptions been concerned with attempting to show that Black children read texts written in Black dialect grammar better than texts written in standard English.

Two studies, Ruddell (1963) and Tatham (1970), provide indirect evidence on the question because they used standard English speaking White children. They both found that standard English speaking White elementary school children comprehended material written in grammatical sentence patterns more frequently used in their oral language better than material written in sentence patterns less frequently used in their oral language.

The findings of these studies support the notion that children comprehend written language better if it is closer to their oral language and that written language further away from their spoken language interferes with reading. If these findings can be demonstrated with Black dialect speaking children, then the reading interference hypothesis would receive strong support.

Unfortunately for the proponents of dialect readers the same results have not been found in studies of dialect speakers. Walker (1975) in a study of third grade children who speak a Newfoundland dialect found that the standard

English texts produced faster reading speeds and fewer errors than the dialect texts. Studies of Black dialect speaking children in grades two through four have been conducted by Schaaf (1971), Sims (1972), Simons and Johnson (1974), Nolen (1972), Mathewson (1974) and Marriot and Newman (1974). Taken all together they used a variety of reading materials including stories written especially for the studies, folktales, and standardized passages from reading tests each written in a Black dialect and standard English version. The criterion measures included multiple choice comprehension questions, free recall and oral reading errors. The results were either no differences between the versions or better reading of the standard English version. In no instance was the Black dialect version read better. Thus all these studies of dialect speakers including the Rentel and Kennedy (1972) study mentioned earlier, which also studied grammatical interference, offer no support for the grammatical reading interference hypothesis. The only support for it is the very indirect evidence provided by the Ruddell (1963) and Tatham (1970) studies.

Overall the empirical evidence in support of grammatical as well as phonological interference is very thin indeed. There is almost no positive evidence to support it. On the basis of the empirical evidence discussed in this paper, Black dialect as an explanation for Black children's poor reading performance seems almost a dead issue. However, the issue is not as moribund as it appears to be.

Alternative Explanation for Negative Evidence On the Reading Interference Hypothesis

The negative evidence on reading interference may be due more to the way it has been studied and conceived of rather than to the reality of its existence or non-existence. As mentioned earlier grammatical interference has been almost

exclusively studied by comparing Black children's reading of texts written in standard English and Black dialect. These studies have been criticized because of the size and nature of their sample of subjects and the appropriateness of the materials, i.e., whether and to what degree the Black dialect versions matched the Black children's speech (Baratz 1971, Simons 1972). These criticisms tend to weaken the negative findings on interference. And while these criticisms may have some validity, I believe that the findings are essentially valid, i.e., Black children when given a text written in Black dialect will not read it with any better comprehension than they will a text written in standard English. In fact they will probably read it with less comprehension than the standard English text due to the novelty of encountering their dialect in print for the first time, even though they may prefer to listen to spoken Black dialect and comprehend it better. In fact this latter point is supported by Mathewson (1974). He found that Black children had a more positive attitude and better comprehension toward folktales told to them in Black dialect than when told to them in standard English; while the reverse was true when the folktales were presented in written form.

The reason, in my opinion, for the finding of no advantage for the Black dialect texts is that the places in the standard English texts that present conflict points with Black children's dialect do not cause any serious loss of comprehension. For example, when "ed" is not interpreted as past tense, there are other redundant syntactic and semantic cues which provide the same information. Thus there is no loss of information. In the studies under discussion when the Black dialect text is presented with conflict points removed there is no increase in comprehension over the standard English text because the conflict points did not cause any real problems in the first place. Some evidence for

this conclusion is provided by Labov (1970) who studied interference caused by the past tense morpheme "ed." More specifically he investigated whether or not Black adolescents understood that the "ed" signaled past action. He had subjects read aloud isolated sentences like the following: "When I passed by, I read the posters." and "I looked for trouble when I read the news." Their pronunciation of the homograph "read" indicated whether or not they had understood the "ed" to be a past tense marker. Labov found that his subjects were able to comprehend the past tense marker only 35 to 55% of the time. This fact suggests that failure to pronounce the "ed" interfered with comprehension of his sentences a substantial part of the time. He also found that performance on this task did not correlate with overall reading skill as measured by a standardized reading comprehension test. This lack of correlation between comprehension of the past tense marker and overall reading skill suggests that even though specific features of dialect may not be comprehended they do not interfere with overall comprehension.

The explanation for the lack of interference with comprehension of connected text is that any ambiguities that may arise in individual sentences concerning tense, plurality, possessive, etc., are compensated for by syntactic and semantic information in the rest of the text or by other semantic information within the same sentence. Thus one would expect no comprehension problem with a sentence like, "Yesterday when I passed by, I read the posters." because a redundant cue, i.e., yesterday, to the past tense interpretation has been added. One would also expect that even the original Labov sentence would be understood when embedded in a passage which provided other redundant cues for the past tense.

Thus there appears to be no interference from dialect during actual reading of texts because of the availability of other redundant cues to meaning. I would like to argue, however, that reading interference may still exist but that the studies reviewed here have conceived of it and attempted to demonstrate it in an inadequate way. A number of the studies reviewed have asked whether there would be differences in comprehension in reading texts with and without dialect conflict points, i.e., in standard English and Black dialect. If differences in comprehension in the predicted direction between the texts are found then reading interference exists. The real question in my opinion is not whether Black children's dialect interferes with their actual reading of texts, but whether their dialect interferes with their acquisition of reading skills necessary to read these texts. The problem is that Black dialect speaking children have not acquired sufficient reading skills to read texts written for their grade level whether they are written in standard English or Black dialect.

I would like to propose that Black dialect reading interference should be conceived of as interference with the process by which children acquire reading skills rather than with their actual reading of texts. Reading acquisition is a developmental process that takes place over a period of time and it should be studied as such. One shot experiments in which children read standard English and Black dialect texts will not tell us much about reading interference or the reading acquisition process.

One approach to demonstrating interference that is more ecologically valid than the one shot approaches has been suggested by Baratz (1969), Stewart (1969) and others. This approach is to teach Black children to read using dialect

readers and compare their reading achievement to other Black children using conventional readers. If the Black children learn to read better with the dialect readers than with traditional readers, then not only would reading interference be demonstrated but the solution to the problem verified, i.e., use dialect readers.

This approach to the issue in my opinion offers little hope for either demonstrating interference or solving Black children's reading problem. There are a number of reasons for my pessimism. First, there is the problem of constructing the reading texts. Black children differ in the frequency of the dialect features they produce so there is the general problem of which children's speech is to be matched. Second, there is the problem of conducting large scale, long term, comparative curriculum experiments in the schools. There are a multitude of methodological problems, the most severe of which is lack of control over teacher variables that are in my opinion insurmountable. The inconclusiveness of the decoding versus meaning reading methods experiments is in part due to their failure to overcome the methodological problems that are inherent in large scale intact classroom experiments. Third, there is the vehement opposition of Black teachers, administrators and parents. They object to dialect readers because they see them as perpetuating the use of dialect which they believe to be an impediment to achieving full participation in society. Because of this opposition, as far as I know, no large scale dialect reader experiment has ever been attempted. The problem is further complicated because the Blacks that are administrators in school districts and are thus in key positions to stop these experiments are often the most vehement opponents of them. I am not optimistic about overcoming this opposition, at least in the short run.

Fourth, in reading methods studies where one set of materials is compared to another, differences, when they are found, usually have a magnitude of a few months on a standardized reading test. These differences could just as easily be attributed to teacher difference as they could to method. On the other hand, the discrepancy between the scores of Black and White children can range from five months to five years depending upon the grade level tested. Thus it seems unlikely that differences in reading materials alone could explain the gap between Whites and Blacks. It seems highly improbable that dialect readers alone would make enough difference, even if they prove to be superior to standard English readers.

Fifth, there is also the problem that large scale methods comparison studies concentrate on comparing end products, i.e., standardized achievement test scores. There is rarely any examination of the process by which those scores are achieved. Thus whatever the findings of these studies, one is hard pressed to extract any useable information that can be applied in the schools.

Finally, the most serious problem with a methods comparison study, which often boils down to a materials comparison study, is that the variables being manipulated, i.e., the materials, may not be important in the first place. In my opinion, materials alone are not that significant a factor in children's reading achievement.

The most fruitful way to study reading interference is to study the reading acquisition process directly and the role that Black children's dialect plays in it by examining reading instruction as it actually takes place in schools.

Learning to read in school involves two types of activities. In the first the student works by him/herself and interacts with written materials. The research reviewed in this paper has been aimed at examining the degree of reading interference that takes place during this type of activity. The negative research evidence and the discussion of it presented above suggests that reading interference during this type of activity is not a major problem. Since the research has not provided the detailed type of analysis over time of this activity, this source of interference cannot be ruled out completely.

However, the second type of activity that children engage in when learning to read provides a more promising site for reading interference. This activity involves what is usually thought of as instruction. It consists of a teacher instructing or guiding a child or group of children in some reading related activity. The medium for this activity is spoken language and the activity involves a language interchange between teacher and child or children. I would like to suggest that what takes place during this activity is a major determinant of the degree of reading skill that Black children acquire. The study of the language interchange during this activity should provide important information about the reasons Black children have so much difficulty learning to read and the role their dialect plays in this difficulty.

A Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Framework For Studying Classroom Interaction

The recent research in linguistics and sociolinguistics provides a useful framework for analyzing the interaction that takes place during classroom reading instruction. The theory of speech acts focuses on the effects that utterances produce. In this theory a distinction is made between the propositional

content of an utterance, i.e., its literal meaning and, its illocutionary force, is its intended effect on others. These two aspects often differ. Thus a statement by a teacher to children like, "We don't sit on the tables," has a literal meaning related to the fact that certain people don't sit on tables. Its illocutionary force is that of a request or order to not sit on the tables. The interpretation of speech acts is dependent upon shared background information, of certain principles of cooperative conversation (Grice 1975), and the ability of the learner to make inferences (Searle 1975). Gumperz (1974, 1976), Gumperz and Herasimchuk (1972), noting that the theory of speech acts deals only with individual utterances, have expanded upon it by proposing the notion of situated meaning. The situated meaning of an utterance is the speaker's intent in a particular context. Context includes the speaker's perception of the social situation and social relations, the type of speech activity, and the relation of the utterance to the utterance surrounding it and the discourse as a whole. The comprehension of the situated meaning of an utterance is dependent upon the interpretation of its literal content and the utilization of the meta-communicative cues, i.e., contextualization cues that signal the meaning in a particular social situation. Some contextualization cues that have been identified include, intonation, code switching, stress, choice of lexical items and syntactic structure, rhythm, loudness and softness, and utterance sequencing strategies. Thus effective communication involves interpretation of the situated meaning of messages which is in turn dependent upon the proper interpretation of the literal meaning as well as the contextualization cues. The type of communicative strategies employed and the meaning of contextualization cues is largely a matter of social convention. Thus as Gumperz (1975) explains it shared communicative background experiences are a major determinant of communicative strategy which includes the use and interpretation of contextualization cues.

> Since the conventions governing the interpretation of contextualization cues are not overtly verbalized, they must be learned indirectly through regular and direct associations with their uses. Understanding of contextualization cues is therefore in large part a matter of shared background, of similarity of past communicative experience and values.
>
> (Gumperz 1976)

Since there are cultural differences in communicative background there will be cultural differences in communicative strategies and in the interpretation of the situated meaning of passages. This could lead to miscommunication between members of different cultural groups. In this way cultural differences can cause miscommunication.

The problems that Black children encounter when learning to read in school may be in part at least the results of miscommunication of situated meaning between teacher and student that is caused by an unshared communicative background.

Reading Interference and Classroom Interaction

One obvious way to study the problem of miscommunication is to examine classroom interaction during reading instruction. Piestrup (1973) conducted one of the only studies that looked at the language interchange during reading instruction of Black children. She observed and tape recorded the reading instruction in fourteen Black inner city first grade classrooms. She focused on episodes where dialect usage occurred during reading instruction as well as episodes where other language instruction took place. She found teacher style differences in handling of Black children's language and these differences were reflected in some differences in reading scores among classrooms. These

findings must be treated cautiously because the children in the classrooms were not equated in ability to begin with so that differences in end of year reading scores between classrooms may be due to initial ability differences rather than teacher style influences.

The episodes she describes are the most important aspect of the study. The episodes involving dialect interference provide the data from which some clues to the mechanisms of interference may be inferred. The remainder of this paper is devoted to an analysis of one of these episodes.

In this episode children are seated around a large table reading sentences printed on long manila strips. Each child has his/her own printed sentence which is large enough for the group to read.

Reading Interference Episode

Line 1. Teacher (T) This one, (C_1). This way, (C_1). Come on you're right here. Hurry up.

2. C_1 /dey/

3. T Get your finger out of your mouth.

4. C_1 call (child continues without hesitation)

5. T Start again.

6. C_1 /dey/ call, What is it? What is it?

7. T What's this word? (pointing out the word "They")

8. C_2 /dey/

9. C_1 /dat/

10. T What is it? (contrastive stress on "What")

11. C_3 /dæt/

12. C_2 /dey/

13. C_1 /dey/

14. T Look at my tongue. <u>They</u> (stress on "th")

15. C_1 They

16. T They. Look at my tongue. (between her teeth)

17. C_1 /they/ (between /ðey/ and /dey/ but closer to /dey/)

18. T That's right. Say it again.

19. C_1 /they/ (between/ðey/ and /dey/ but closer to /dey/)

20. T They. O.K. Pretty good. O.K. ...C_1

The discussion that follows is speculative in nature and is meant to be suggestive and provocative of further research rather than definitive. The discussion and conclusions are limited by the unavailability of nonverbal information that was communicated in the episodes, and the inability to question the participants about the cues used and their intentions inevitably leads to ambiguity. Gumperz (1976) has proposed a questioning strategy to be employed with participants in a conversation that will help reduce these ambiguities. There is also the problem that the theory of situated meaning is still evolving and has not been worked out in detail. Thus its application in any verbal interchange leaves room for different interpretations. Further the generality of the conclusions is limited by the sample of teachers that Piestrup studied since there is no information about their representativeness. With these limitations in mind, let us turn to the analysis of the episode.

The crux of the communicative problem in this episode appears to be the unshared background knowledge of the participants about standard English and Black dialect pronunciation, and the teacher's unsuccessful verbal strategies for eliciting the response that she wants.

The episode begins with C_1 in line 1 pronouncing the word "they" in a manner consistent with his own dialect thus indicating successful recognition of the word. The child's definition of the reading task at this point in the episode is to correctly recognize and pronounce the words in his own dialect. By his own definition of the task he is successfully accomplishing it in a way that is consistent with his communicative background. The teacher's definition of the task is similar to that of the child's but is different in one crucial way. For her the task is also to recognize and pronounce the word but the pronunciation must be in standard English. It is not clear whether she believes that correct recognition of words in reading is only indicated by standard English pronunciation or whether she is consciously attempting to teach standard English as a part of the reading task. The rest of this episode can be seen as an unsuccessful attempt by the teacher, through the use of communicative strategies, to get the child to adopt her definition of the task.

The child's first word in line 1 does not fully conform to the teacher's definition of the task. In order to get him to adopt her definition of the task she says in line 2, "Get your finger out of your mouth." This is on one level a command to the child to take his finger away from his mouth. On another level it may also indicate that the child has made a mistake in pronouncing the word due to his finger being in his mouth. It is also probably a command to go back and "correct" the word to standard English pronunciation. C_1 in line 4 fails to interpret the situated meaning of the teacher's utterance, ignores it and continues reading. In line 5 the teacher interrupts the child's reading again with the statement, "Start again." On one level the utterance is a command to start reading the sentence again. The situated meaning is a command to correct his "mistake." The child fails again to respond to the situated meaning but responds only to the literal meaning and in line 6 reads the full sentence without correcting the "mistake."

In both of the teacher's utterances the contextualization cues are lexical and the child fails to respond appropriately to them and, thus, fails to get the situated meaning of the utterances. This failure to interpret the situated meaning of these utterances may be due to his failure to correctly interpret the contextualization cue that in the school situation "Start again," and "Get your finger out of your mouth," means you have made a mistake and you must correct it. But even if he has interpreted the contextualization cue correctly and understands that he made a mistake, his unshared background knowledge does not allow him to correct it. More specifically the teacher in her ignorance of his dialect expects him to be able to hear and produce the distinction between /ð / and /d/ in initial position in words while the fact that he is a Black dialect speaker makes this difficult if not impossible. The fact that later on in the episode his presumably standard pronunciation in the teacher's eyes is closer to dialect that to standard supports the contention that the distinction is not in his repertoire. He also may not see its salience to reading. The fact that he makes no attempt to change his response as he does later on in the episode in response to different contextualization cues suggests that there is a problem interpreting these contextualization cues. In line 7 the teacher changes her contextualization cue to a question, "What's this word?" accompanied by a nonverbal cue, i.e., pointing. The situated meaning of the utterance is the same, i.e., correct the mistake. However, here she is more specific in showing which word is to be corrected and in providing a redundant cue. C_1 correctly interprets the cue as is shown by his changing the word on which the teacher has focused. But he is unable to get the full situated meaning and produces a different word, /dæt/, which indicates again his inability to produce the standard English pronunciation that the teacher expects. C_1's

response /dɔ̈t/ in line 9 departs considerably from the actual printed text and ignores the notion that words should fit into the context of a sentence. The teacher responds with the utterance in line 10, "What is it?" with contrastive stress on "what." Here the contextualization cue is stress and intonation indicating again that the response is wrong and it should be corrected. C_1 correctly interprets the cue and changes his answer. Unfortunately he does not produce the right answer because of his dialect. C_3 and C_2 also produce wrong answers because of their dialect. At this point in the episode the children's definition of the task has shifted from one of word recognition to one of trying to guess what the teacher wants them to say. They have given up the reading task and switched to a guessing game. The rest of the episode turns into an unsuccessful lesson in standard English pronunciation in which the teacher eventually accepts as correct without realizing it a pronunciation of "they" that is closer to Black dialect than standard English. It is not clear that the children have learned anything about reading or about standard English from this episode.

Another aspect of this episode which is of interest is the teacher's questioning strategy and in particular the utterance she uses to signal to C_1 that his response is incorrect and that he should correct it. She uses utterances such as, "Get your finger out of your mouth, " "Start again," "What's this word," and "What is it?". Other teachers on the Piestrup tapes use "Pardon me?", "I can't hear you." and repetition of children's responses with question intonation. All of these utterances that teachers use to correct children are characterized by their indirectness. They only indirectly tell the children what is wrong. The use of this indirectness which characterizes the episode under discussion and other episodes in the Piestrup data often results in children not producing

the "right" answer, i.e., the answer that the teacher wants. The use of indirectness may cause communication problems in the following ways. Indirectness is an effective strategy when there is a great deal of shared background knowledge. In the case of Black children there is probably less shared background knowledge than teachers assume, because, in addition to adult-child differences, there are cultural differences in communicative background experiences. When shared background knowledge is missing or low then the child must rely more heavily on contextualization cues to draw inferences about the situated meaning. And there may be cultural and adult-child differences in the selection and use of contextualization cues (Gumperz 1976). In addition, it has been pointed out that indirectness is not very useful when new information is being conveyed and instruction in school often presumably involves new information (Cook-Gumperz 1976). Also in everyday conversation where there is a great deal of indirectness when someone does not understand the meaning of an indirect speech act s/he can ask the speaker to explain in a more direct way. In the tapes under study this does not happen very often. It may be that it is not encouraged or accepted in school discourse. If this is the case, then the child is put at a further disadvantage in interpreting indirectness then s/he would be in everyday conversation because s/he cannot use his/her normal repair strategies when s/he does not understand something. Finally, indirectness often leads to a series of questions when the first question is not answered correctly. The simple length of the interchange may increase the probability that the children will be distracted from the original reading task.

The issue of the use of indirectness by teachers is particularly important because teachers are taught to use strategies that require students to draw inferences and work things out for themselves. The use of indirectness is a

widely used way of accomplishing this. If further research bears out some of the above speculation then important implications for teacher training could be drawn.

This episode suggests some of the mechanisms by which Black children's dialect interferes with learning to read. The unshared knowledge between teacher and child about dialect, children's problems with interpreting contextualization cues, and the teachers' indirect teaching strategies all combine to distract the child from the reading task.

In other episodes the children are not distracted from the reading task as completely as in the episode discussed. Reading simply gets defined as the production of pronunciations that no one uses. Thus in one episode children are made to pronounce the word "pond" as pond + /ʌ/ by a teacher attempting to get them to produce the final consonant. Thus reading becomes a strange activity that differs substantially from everyday language use.

Whether the mechanisms for reading interference discussed in the preceding section occur often enough or are important enough to account for the magnitude of reading failure of Black children must remain an open question until more research has been conducted.

My guess is that dialect is only part of the problem. There are other differences between various aspects of Black children's culture and the school culture that could lead to interference with learning to read. There are peer group influences (Lewis 1970), audience participation expectations (Abrahams and Gay 1973, Kochman 1971), turn taking rules, and nonverbal communication strategies (Johnson 1971), in Black culture that may conflict with the instructional situation in schools. There is also teachers' failure to build upon modes of communication that are specific to Black culture such as verbal

play and the emphasis on form rather than content (Kochman 1969). All of these factors including dialect when added to a more adequate knowledge of the psychological processes involved in learning to read than we presently possess could go a long way toward explaining and remedying the reading problems of Black children. The research must have its main focus on the classroom and the description and analysis of how these factors directly influence Black children's learning.

As far as reading instruction is concerned, there should be a shift of emphasis away from instructional materials to attempts to change teachers' strategies for teaching Black children that takes into account their language and cultural differences. Unfortunately it is not clear at the present time what teachers should be taught since we do not have a very clear idea of the mechanisms of interference. Nor do we have a very detailed idea of what teachers are presently doing. Research that provides detailed descriptions of classroom instruction will provide some of this information. Working with teachers in analyzing and describing classroom episodes such as contained in the Piestrup data may provide a good starting point for our efforts to change teachers' strategies for teaching Black children.

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Footnotes

[1]A related version of this proposal is to write materials by avoiding Black dialect features. Wolfram (1970) has pointed out some of the problems with this approach. It has not been researched to my knowledge and not much interest has been shown in it.

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[2]The distinction between grammatical and phonological features of Black dialect is not clear cut. First, there are features that are wholly phonological such as consonant cluster simplification in monomorphemic words, e.g., "test"-"tess," "desk"-"dess." Second, there are features that are phonological in origin but intersect with consonant cluster simplification in words with past tense morphemes, e.g., "liked"-"like," "passed"-"pass," etc. Third, there are features that are clearly grammatical such as the invariant "be." In this discussion, phonological and grammatical interference will be discussed separately, in the full recognition that there are many features in category two.

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OPEN DISCUSSION OF SIMONS PRESENTATION

McCONKIE: It's interesting that the last statement you made assumes that the teachers you are going to teach are white, because of course if you are going to teach black teachers, you don't have to teach them that.

SIMONS: That's a wrong assumption on your part. Half the teachers in this study were black.

McCONKIE: Presumably, if you had cultural similarity between the black teacher and the black kids, then we should get exactly the opposite of the effects you report, unless the black teachers are from a cultural background that makes them more similar to the white than the black kids, with respect to language, and so on. Has there been research that has shown this kind of a shift, when you work with black teachers who do understand the dialect of the black kids, and perhaps who use it?

SIMONS: Black teachers do some of the same things, as I described here. Other black teachers do other things, that are much closer to black kids' communication style. This is why based on the sample of 12 teachers, I make no claim for generality.

There are a couple of teachers in the sample that Pisstrup identifies as black artful, and they do all kinds of things that appear to be much more consistent with the black children's communicative styles. These two teachers engaged in verbal play and they do other things that more traditional teachers would consider to be appalling.

McCONKIE: Do you have any sense about whether the black kids in those classrooms are in fact learning to read?

SIMONS: In this study, yes. Well, the study is equivocal, because there was no pre-test, but the kids from these two teachers, in this limited study, read better at the end of first grade.

WEDDINGTON: When you say "better," how does that differ? I mean, is there a different identification of what is done?

SIMONS: No, no. It has been fairly well studied, and there is a whole set of features of black dialect that are different from Standard English.

WEDDINGTON: But doesn't this represent a value system?

SIMONS: Absolutely. That's part of the problem. If black dialect was accepted in the way my Boston accent is, you wouldn't have reading interference from dialect, you would have something else.

WEDDINGTON: I propose that the rendition of the word is really not so important in comprehension, if comprehension is taking place, but the other aspect of it is, the basic assumption is that certain spellings represent certain pronunciations.

SIMONS: When I grew up, everyone, including the teacher, made the same deviations, so there was no need for episodes like this. I mean, there was no correction, because there was nothing to correct; we all spoke the same way,

even though it was different from the way the reading program described it.

McCONKIE: The year I spent in Boston, I wasn't too happy about them teaching my kids that "father," like "your father and mother," and "farther," like "farther down the street," are homonyms.

SIMONS: They are, of course, in Boston. The issue is that I suppose we are trying to get the kids to conform to something inconsistent with their communicative background.

TRABASSO: You seem to make an assumption that teachers in general might share knowledge with children. It seems to me it is hardly ever the case that the teacher shares knowledge with the child; that's part of the game, to teach them, bring them to the point where you do share knowledge.

The basic premise of your socio-linguistic approach seems to me to be incorrect; that is, when will it be the case that you have completed shared knowledge, so that you can prevent misunderstandings? I don't see how this can be the real source of the problem. There are so many possibilities for misinterpretations, independent of race. The fact that you have paired an adult with a child creates the absence of shared knowledge.

SIMONS: Well, I think it is a matter of degree, rather than either yes or no, because there are certainly adult-child differences in communicative strategies. But in addition there are also cultural differences in strategies, and it is a question of degree.

Obviously the schools are giving the kids information. It is how you present that information, rather than what the information is, necessarily. One hypothesis would be that the communicative strategies of middle-class teachers are closer to middle-class white kids. Middle-class black and white teachers are closer to middle-class white kids than to black kids. The kids have to learn that in school.

TRABASSO: The implication of what you are saying is we should give middle-class mothers to the children before they come in school, so they would do better in school.

SIMONS: No, you changed the thesis.

TRABASSO: The problem is that you are saying there are cultural differences which lead to a lack of shared knowledge about communicative acts. This is going to give rise to misunderstandings, and you get this whole snowball effect. It seems to me one could take your analysis, take the same protocols, and get a very different analysis, which also point out another source of difficulty. In particular, if one talked about what it takes to help bring about the acquisition of this information, what kind of interactions are required, I could start labeling them accepting, rejecting statements. I don't need to go back into any kind of background of shared knowledge. In other words, the teacher doesn't accept what the child says the first time, the second time, the third time, and so forth, and the question is whether those failures to accept affect the child. Why do I have to go into this speech-act analysis, and say it is a causative influence on why black children don't read?

SIMONS: It is more complicated than saying accept and reject; there all kinds of subtle things going on that people are unconscious of. All of these are corrective, but the way it is done may have an important influence on what is going on. So it isn't simply a question of reject and accept. There are subtle things to look at. Maybe it won't turn out to be that important, I am just suggesting this as a direction for research, rather than as a conclusion.

MacGINITIE: One thing that happened in the example that was given is that the teacher did not make clear what response was wanted. The teacher is more likely to receive a response that will be accepted, if the teacher has made clear what response is wanted. The kind of response that <u>should</u> be accepted is a more difficult problem in the teaching of writing than in the teaching of reading. The question of whether to accept a Black English grammatical rendition is more critical in the case of writing.

There is a basic problem with most of the studies that have been done on the effects of changing the grammatical structure of what the kids read. Those who have tried to learn to use a foreign language in a real-life situation know that it requires not simply a translation of English, but it's a whole new way or style of saying things. The same thing is true to a considerable extent of dialects as well. There is a whole different way of saying things. If you simply take a Standard English text, and translate it literally into Black English, which is what has usually been done, the result is not Black English.

SIMONS: Yes. What I am suggesting is that we go into the classrooms and start analyzing what goes on, and then decide what to do. Teachers give the kids a lot of misinformation about language, they tell them things that aren't so, and kids get confused.

HAMMOND: It seems to me the difference between somebody who speaks what you call black dialect and Walter Cronkite, is not the same as the difference between the way you are speaking Standard English with a Boston accent and Walter Cronkite, because in the case of the black dialect there are syntactical differences, as well as differences in pronunciation. It also seems to me when we are considering the intereference that may come from speaking black dialect or another non-standard dialect, we have to consider the affective domain, as well as the linguistic domain. That is, what difference does it make to me that my dialect is put down, that it's considered substandard? These are two questions that probably ought to be separated out. And I am not clear from what you said the extent to which that's been done or do-able.

It also seems to me that you suggested that the evidence that there is makes it look like black kids, who speak black dialect, can understand Standard English. The question is whether they can produce it or not. Understanding and producing ought to be looked at differently. Your earlier comments about writing are quite relevant there since writing is a form of production. I wonder what anybody has done about looking at kids who speak black dialect, and also learn to read Standard English. What do we know about how they differ from their counterparts who don't learn to read Standard English? Are the former bidialectal? What else do we know about them?

SIMONS: There is research that the kids understand spoken Standard English, and they don't produce it, they produce dialect. It is hard to get them to change their speech in school. I think I agree with most of what you say. I don't think there is any more need to research the features at all. I think that we should move on to the functional conflicts. The attitude is probably quite important, I don't know if you can separate it.

LESGOLD: There are a number of research questions that are suggested by your paper, and those will take a long time to answer, I believe. There are a number of value questions that may never be answerable. But, I think there are some things that we can say in the role of this conference as a prescriptive institution. We can say things like the following: teachers ought to be trained to realize when they are punishing kids. They ought to be trained to realize when they say, "Get your finger out of your mouth," rather than, "Yes, that's the right word, but I don't like the way you pronounced it," that they are not telling the kid what's wrong. And I don't see why we can't at least suggest this level of training immediately, and then take up what I think are some very interesting research questions that are going to take a lot longer to answer.

WEDDINGTON: I was wondering, is there observation in these classrooms, and what is done about grammatical structure as being isolated from reading, whether there is the teaching of grammatical structure? It seems to me that grammatical structures, as rules, should be separated from reading behavior.

SIMONS: I think that's true, but I think we really need a lot more extensive observation of what actually happens in the school, and I have just picked out a few episodes. We need much, much more data on all kinds of things that go on.